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1965/05/08

THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE
WASHINGTON 25, D.C.

8 May 1965

Dear Mr. President:

I have shown this letter to both the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. If you wish I will hold further discussions with them to evolve a paper which will set forth the several views on the enclosed recommendations.

Basically, I agree with Mr. McCone's argument that the courses of action recommended in the Secretary of Defense's memorandum of 21 April are not likely, by themselves, to gain us our present objectives. As I understand it, Mr. McCone felt that the deployment of additional US troops to South Vietnam should be accompanied by heavier attacks on the more important targets located in northern North Vietnam, though this expansion need not be sudden and dramatic but could be gradual and extend over a period of time.

a. Our limited bombing of the North and our present ground force build-up in the South are not likely to exert sufficient pressure on the enemy to cause him to meet our present terms in the foreseeable future. I note very recent evidence which suggests that our military pressures are becoming somewhat more damaging to the enemy within South Vietnam, but I am inclined to doubt that this damage is increasing at a rate which will bring him quickly to the conference table.

b. I concur in the CIA-DIA-State view of 21 April that the large-scale introduction of US ground forces will not initially cause the enemy to back off.

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By WJ, NARS, Date 1-3-86

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c. I also concur in the recent intelligence warnings that the VC may seek some dramatic local victories in South Vietnam (e.g., investment of Da Nang and/or Kontum) in the near future -- that is, before the US can accomplish a large ground force build-up.

d. The envisaged US ground force holding operation will buy time for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but it will also give the enemy time to improve his capabilities -- including the infiltration of more units of the "People's Army of North Vietnam" (PAVN). It is of course possible that the greater US/Government of South Vietnam (GVN) military effort on the ground will in time prove overwhelmingly discouraging to the enemy. Given our present course, this question -- the anti-guerrilla effectiveness of a greatly expanded US/GVN effort in South Vietnam -- will almost certainly prove the key determinant of whether, over a period of some time, we can impel the enemy to meet our terms. The French experience may unduly influence my judgment, but I am impressed with the consideration that if our air attacks against the North are confined within the limits recommended in the Secretary of Defense's memorandum, we will in effect be pressing the conflict on the ground where our capabilities enjoy the least comparative advantage. In these circumstances -- and given the enemy's known resolve and skill concerning attrition tactics over the long term -- I am concerned that we will find ourselves pinned down, with little choice left among possible subsequent courses of action: i.e., disengagement at very high cost, or broadening the conflict in quantum jumps.

e. In the event that, instead, the US/GVN effort should begin to wear down the Viet Cong (VC), I share the 21 April memorandum's judgment that the chances would be somewhat better than even that the "Democratic Republic of North Vietnam" (DRV) would seek at least a temporary political solution, rather than launch a major ground invasion.

I feel that Mr. McCone's recommended course of greater air action against the DRV is based on the following considerations:

a. The DRV is, in my view, unlikely to engage in meaningful discussions at any time in coming months until US air attacks have begun to damage or destroy its principal economic and military targets. I also concur with the USIB's judgment of 18 February 1965 (the State Department member dissenting) that, given such US punishment, the enemy would be "somewhat more likely" to decide to make some effort to secure a respite, rather than to intensify the struggle further and accept the consequent risks.

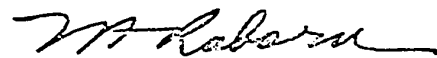
b. Insofar as possible, we should try to manage any program of expanded bombings in ways which (1) would leave the DRV an opportunity to explore negotiations without complete loss of face, (2) would not preclude any Soviet pressures on Hanoi to keep the war from expanding, and (3) would not suddenly produce extreme world pressures against us. In this connection, the timing and circumstances in which the bombings were extended northward could be of critical importance, particularly in light of the fact that there have been some indications of differing views between Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi. For example, it would probably be advantageous to expand bombings after, not before, some major new VC move (e.g., obvious concentration for imminent attack on Da Nang or Kontum) and after, not before, any current possibilities of serious negotiations have been fully tested. And such bombings should not be so regular as to leave no interval for the Communists to make concessions with some grace. Indeed, we should keep in mind the possibility of a pause at some appropriate time, which could serve to test the Communist intentions and to exploit any differences on their side.

We must not of course get overly preoccupied with military action and lose sight of the basically political aspect of the war. In the final analysis, it can only be won at the SVN hamlet level.

This will thus entail certain measures over and above greater military commitment and expanded punishment of the DRV. The most imperative of these are:

- a. Creating effective administrative, police, and local defense instrumentalities at the hamlet level.
- b. Making US and GVN military measures support a growth of indigenous civilian political authority and serve legitimate local and national aspirations.
- c. Expanding such political, economic, and sociological efforts as will close the gap between Saigon governments and the South Vietnamese population.

The expanded air attacks on North Vietnam, judiciously exercised, are not expected to result in large-scale Chinese Communists intervention by ground forces in Vietnam or elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as long as the Chinese do not believe their vital security interest is threatened by US actions. In other words, the chances of such actions are less than even, but should not be wholly excluded.



William F. Raborn, Jr.
Vice Admiral, USN (Ret.)
Director

Attachments:

- Annex A - Mr. McCone's ltr of 28 Apr 65
- Annex B - Expansion of views contained
in DCI's letter, 8 May 65
- Annex C - Recent Intell Resume pertinent to
Vietnam Situation

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ANNEX A

THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

T. S. #188645
Copy #1

28 April 1965

Dear Mr. President:

I remain concerned, as I have said before to you, Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara, over the limited scale of air action against North Vietnam which we envision for the next few months.

Specifically I feel that we must conduct our bombing attacks in a manner that will begin to hurt North Vietnam badly enough to cause the Hanoi regime to seek a political way out through negotiation rather than expose their economy to increasingly serious levels of destruction. By limiting our attacks to targets like bridges, military installations and lines of communication, in effect we signal to the Communists that our determination to win is significantly modified by our fear of widening the war.

In these circumstances the Communists are likely to feel they can afford to accept a considerable amount of bomb damage while they improve their air defenses and step up their insurgency in South Vietnam. If they take this line of action, in the next few months they can present us with an ever-increasing guerrilla war against the reinforced Viet Cong in terrain and circumstances favorable to the Communists.

If this situation develops and lasts several months or more, I feel world opinion will turn against us, Communist propaganda will become increasingly effective, and indeed domestic support of our policy may erode.

I therefore urge that as we deploy additional troops, which I believe necessary, we concurrently hit the north harder and inflict greater damage. In my opinion, we should strike

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ANNEX A

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their petroleum supplies, electric power installations, and air defense installations (including the SAM sites which are now being built). I do not think we have to fear taking on the MIG's, which after all the ChiNats defeated in 1953 with F-86's and Sidewinders.

I am not talking about bombing centers of population or killing innocent people, though there will of course be some casualties. I am proposing to "tighten the tourniquet" on North Vietnam so as to make the Communists pause to weigh the losses they are taking against their prospects for gains. We should make it hard for the Viet Cong to win in the south and simultaneously hard for Hanoi to endure our attacks in the north.

I believe this course of action holds out the greatest promise we can hope for in our effort to attain our ultimate objective of finding a political solution to the Vietnam problem. This view follows logically, it seems to me, from our National Intelligence Estimate of 13 February 1965, which concludes that the Hanoi regime would be more likely than not to make an effort to "secure a respite" by some political move when and if, but not before, a sustained U. S. program of air attacks is damaging important economic or military assets in North Vietnam.

I attach a copy of my memorandum of April 2nd, which may not have come to your attention, since it argues this case in a little more detail.

Respectfully yours,

John A. McCone

Attachment:

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

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ANNEX B

DATA TO SUPPORT VIEWS CONTAINED IN DCI'S LETTER TO THE
PRESIDENT DATED 8 MAY 1965

- I. The current programs for our air strikes against North Vietnam, as I understand them, limit the targets to such objectives as bridges, military installations, and lines of communication, avoiding targets in populated areas or within the "effective GCI range" of MIG jet fighters.
- A. I do not believe that an air strike program operating under these restrictions is going to hurt the North Vietnamese enough to persuade Hanoi to end its support of the guerrillas in South Vietnam, or even to negotiate.
1. We have some recent evidence that the intensification of our air strikes is disrupting the economy and the every-day life of the North Vietnamese, but the strikes to date have not caused any change in the North Vietnamese policy of directing the Viet Cong insurgency, infiltrating cadres, and supplying materiel.
 2. If anything, the strikes to date appear to have hardened Hanoi's attitude. By now the North Vietnamese may well have discerned for themselves the restraints under which the ROLLING THUNDER operations are conducted. They are likely to read this as evidence of an U.S. desire to temporize.
 3. In these circumstances, the Communists will probably feel that they can afford to accept a considerable amount of bomb damage while they improve their air defenses and intensify the insurgency in South Vietnam. If they do this, we face the prospect over the next few months of an ever-increasing war against a reinforced Viet Cong, in terrain and under circumstances favorable to the Communists.

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ANNEX B

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4. Another hazard that must be kept in mind when we speak in terms of a "slowly ascending tempo" for ROLLING THUNDER is that with the passage of each day and each week, we can expect increasing pressure to stop the bombing. This pressure will come from various elements of the American public, from the press, from the United Nations, and from world opinion. Under these restraints, time is running against us. The Communists not only know this and count on it, but are doing what they can to further the pressure.

B. We are changing the mission of our ground forces in South Vietnam from one of advice and static defense to one of active combat operations against the Viet Cong guerrillas, and to do this we are deploying additional troops.

1. I think what we are doing is starting on a track involving ground force operations, which is necessary, and which will restrain some Viet Cong advances, but a track which -- in all probability -- will have limited effectiveness against guerrillas.
2. We can expect requirements for an ever-increasing commitment of U.S. personnel, but we cannot reasonably predict that this will materially improve the chances for victory. In the final analysis, the submission of the Viet Cong can only be brought about by forcing Hanoi to the necessary decision.
3. As long as our actions against North Vietnam do not impose unacceptable damage nor threaten the vital interests of North Vietnam, I believe that the new ground operations in the South carry the risk of simply encouraging Hanoi to support the Viet Cong, and encouraging Moscow and Peiping to support Hanoi. They are likely to conclude that the risk to them is minimal.
4. As I see it, the reaction of the North Vietnamese and Chinese Communists will be to build up the capabilities of the Viet Cong deliberately, carefully, and probably gradually, by the covert infiltration of North Vietnamese and possibly Chinese reinforcements. We will, in effect, find ourselves pressing the fight on the ground,

in the jungle, where our capabilities have the least comparative advantage. We may become bogged down in a military effort which we cannot win, and from which we cannot easily extricate ourselves.

- II. It is my judgment that if we are to change the mission of the ground forces, we must also change the rules for the air strikes against North Vietnam. We must hit them harder and more frequently, and inflict greater damage. If we are not willing to do this, I question seriously whether it is wise to become more deeply involved in the ground operations.
- A. Specifically, I feel that we must carry on the air strikes in a manner that will begin to hurt North Vietnam badly enough so that Hanoi will prefer negotiation, in search for a political way out, rather than exposure of its economy to increasingly severe levels of destruction.
- B. I feel we must hit their petroleum supplies and their electric power installations. We should knock out their air defense installations, including any surface-to-air missile sites we can find under construction or completed. We should not avoid their MIG fighters, but go after them. I do not think we need to fear taking on MIG's which, after all, the Chinese Nationalists defeated badly in 1958 with F-86's.
- C. I am not talking about bombing centers of population per se, and killing civilians who are not involved. There will, of course, be some casualties, but what I am proposing is to "tighten the tourniquet" on North Vietnam, to multiply the damage to the military and economic fabric of their society so that they will have to measure the actual loss against the long-term prospect for gains.
1. There is probably room for some leeway in the timing of this expanded air strike program. For example, it would probably be advantageous to launch it after, rather than before some major new Viet Cong move, such as obvious concentration for an attack on Da Nang or Kontum.
 2. I feel it might also be wise if the pace of the expanded air strikes were irregular enough so that there would be intervals from time to time when the Communists

could move toward the negotiating tables without total loss of face -- not out of any consideration for their sensitivities, but because this is, after all, what we desire.

3. I do feel, however, that this new program -- including the "timing" element -- must be taken promptly. If it is implemented too gradually, then we will not only face the increasing pressures of domestic, allied and world opinion which I mentioned before, but there is also some danger that the Communists will be slow to get the message.

III. I believe this course of action holds out the greatest hope there is for our ultimate objective of finding a political solution to the Vietnam problem. If we only make it hard for the enemy in the South, we are not bringing effective pressure to bear on his commander in the North. Hanoi, in my view, is not likely to engage in meaningful discussions at any time in coming months, if U.S. air attacks have not yet begun to damage or destroy its principal economic and military targets, which are overwhelmingly in the northern portion of North Vietnam, beyond the scope of our present strikes.

- A. The Intelligence Community, less the Department of State, is in agreement, however, that the Hanoi regime would be more likely than not to seek a respite by some political move when and if -- but not before -- a sustained program of U.S. air strikes is damaging important economic and military assets in North Vietnam.
- B. I think we have got to proceed forthwith to fulfill this condition, and hit the North Vietnamese where it really hurts.

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ANNEX C

INCREASED COMMUNIST CAPABILITIES

FOR VIETNAM

- I. Recent intelligence has pointed to a continuing increase in the capabilities of the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese, the Soviets, and the Chinese Communists for action in Vietnam.
- II. We continue to accumulate reports and evidence of re-training, re-grouping, and re-arming of the Viet Cong main force units, pointing to a probable new offensive when the rainy season starts this month.
 - A. A gradual increase in Viet Cong activity has been noted over the past few days.
 - B. The extensive arms cache discovered last week in Kien Hoa Province, southeast of Saigon in the delta, provided fresh evidence of a concerted program to modernize Viet Cong equipment and increase firepower. The cache had such items as Chinese Communist flame throwers and ammunition for 70 millimeter pack howitzers.
- III. A number of recent reports point to a step-up in training programs for North Vietnamese pilots.

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By xxx NARS, Date 1-3-84

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A.

B. According to a recent report from an untested source, Vietnamese pilots, radio operators, and radar specialists were being trained in Poland prior to last November.

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C. We know

that large groups of Vietnamese had been trained in the Soviet Union for several years prior to the Tonkin Gulf incidents last August, when many of the trainees were called home.

D. The training of this many pilots and other specialists for aviation duties suggests that there must also be plans to make more combat aircraft available to the North Vietnamese.

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IV.

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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

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R. Brown

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[Handwritten notes: what did SNIE say?]

e. In the event that, instead, the US/GVN effort should begin to wear down the Viet Cong (VC), I share the 21 April memorandum's judgment that the chances would be somewhat better than even that the "Democratic Republic of North Vietnam" (DRV) would seek at least a temporary political solution, rather than launch a major ground invasion.

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W F Raborn

William F. Raborn, Jr.
Vice Admiral, USN (Ret.)
Director

Attachments:

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